# Women Leadership at the Apex.

## The Distinctiveness of Urban Women Mayors in Europe.

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**Abstract**

Women occupy leadership positions at all levels of government. While the topic has been extensively investigated referred to national legislatures, other venues remain under-researched. By focusing on the mayoral office this article aims at contributing to fill the research gap regarding the local government arena and specifically executive positions. Drawing on a survey of around 2,600 European mayors, the study investigates if women and men mayors are different in their social background, recruitment patterns and policy priorities. The resulting identikit of the "Urban European Woman Mayor" points to important differences in the career path confirming the differences in policy priorities.

**Key words:** women's political representation, local government, political leadership, mayors, urban democracies

## 1. Introduction

The (under-) representation of women in politics has been widely documented, but empirical analysis remains far more developed for legislatures (Paxton and Hughes 2013; Reynolds 1999; Wängnerud 2009) than for executive positions and more commonly refer to national

than local contexts (Sundström and Wängnerud 2018). At the same time, the existing gender representation research is less habitual to the study of local governance institutions. In the literature on gender and politics, local governments have been traditionally neglected, to the extent that they have been considered a "blind spot" in comparative research on women in politics (Sundström and Wängnerud 2018).

Work on this research deficit is especially timely today, as women are little by little climbing to political office at different levels of government (Müller-Rommel and Vercesi 2017; Reyes-Housholder 2016). Given that the executive office represents the apex of political power and the centre of decision-making processes, access would afford them the opportunity to become agenda setters and eventually achieve policy change. This work aims to analyze the distinctive traits and perceptions of women in local executives.

While the share of women in parliaments has improved worldwide in recent decades (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018), they remain under-represented in executive positions (Claveria 2014; Krook and O'Brien 2012; Müller-Rommel 2017; Reynolds 1999, Gerring et.al., 2019), proving the existence of a thick layer of the glass ceiling, even if certain advances have been made (Jalalzai 2013). Perhaps as a result, research on gender and the executive branch is much less developed. Certainly, recent research efforts on executive positions have focused on prime ministers and members of cabinets (Barnes and Taylor-Robinson 2018; Liu and Banaszak 2017; Reyes-Housholder 2016), but less is known about the access and performance of women at the mayoral office in local democracies. Inquiring on these topics will enable us to better understand the key elements of representation in this particular arena

The current lack of empirical research on women urban mayors merits to be surmounted for two main reasons. First, various processes of "decentralization" have been encouraged all over and city governments have become increasingly relevant in the multilevel governance system and in providing services to benefit the welfare of their residents, particularly in terms of issues that affect women, such as childcare or policies for the elderly. Second, in the European context in particular, urban mayors are increasingly significant actors in political systems, and their leaders have become central pieces and highly influential actors in local, regional and central governance in Europe (Bäck et al. 2006, Heinelt et al, 2018).

Current evidence is predominantly case study driven and based on electoral data merged with secondary indicators and concentrated on descriptive representation issues. There is some comparative evidence focusing in Latin America (see Escobar-Lemmon & Funk 2018,

Funk, Silva & Escobar-Lemmon 2019, Alberti, Diaz-Rioseco & Visconti 2021) for a summary) and notable attempts willing to provide a general overview, based on case studies though (Pini & McDonald, 2013). Indeed, most of the single country works rely on the question of the determinants of women mayors' representation, rather than policy priorities or social background, which are largely dependent on the data availability. In this regard, there is research on the US (Ferreira & Giourko, 2014; Kjaer et.al, 2018; Holman, 2014) Germany (Fortin-Rittberger et.al, 2017), Brazil (Meier & Funk, 2017; Funk & Phillips, 2018) or Australia (Ryan, Pini and Brown, 2005), but to the best of our knowledge, none of them is based on a large sample systematically surveying mayors.

The analysis here proposed has as the main objective to ascertain to what extent there is a gendered path to the mayoral office and whether a link between descriptive representation (characteristics of those in elected office) and substantive representation (policy priorities) can be established (Pitkin, 1967).

For the analysis below, we worked with one of the few available databases on European local government: a survey conducted in 2015-2016 on European mayors from municipalities with populations above 10,000 inhabitants, gathering responses from 2,600 of them from 29 European countries, 12 per cent of whom were women. The database collects information on these leaders' sociodemographic traits and perceptions of their tasks, priorities, patterns of interaction with other local actors, notions of democracy, as well as other issues.

After this introduction, our theoretical framework proceeds by presenting an overview of the main findings and limitations of previous literature on women's descriptive and substantive representation. Then, we propose a set of hypotheses issued from our expectations and we empirically test them for our sample of local leaders, exploring whether or not female mayors differ from men. Our main findings point to differences between men and women on their political careers and we offer empirical evidence on how policy priorities also differ between these two groups. Women tend to be younger than men are and are likely to pay more attention to social issues and present a more leftist agenda.


## 2. Assessing the knowledge on European women mayors

In the quest for understanding to what extent mayor's gender makes any difference at the local leadership apex. The theoretical framework is built upon the discussion of three main aspects: a baseline knowledge of women political representation (and its implications over the debate among numbers and actors); the descriptive representation of women at the local level; and the effects of its presence on substantive representation. This approach is mainly built upon a sociological view of representation, the dominant in gender studies, rather than a more elitist (or Burkean) approach to representation.

Progresses have been completed in the last years in the quantitative monitoring of the presence of women in the European political system, under the pressures for realizing the EU objectives on gender equality, far to be reached, at all the levels of government. Concerning their presence in the legislative institutions, the Institute for Gender Equality dataset registers in 2020 a percentage of 32.8 women in the EU28 national parliaments (24.4 in 2010), 34.2 in the regional ones (vs. 30.1 in 2010), 34.1% in local councils (30.5 in 2011, first data available in dataset). At the local-provincial level, Navarro and Medir (2015) report that women constitute 24.6 per cent of the councils in the countries surveyed. Interestingly, despite the intuitive perception that women would have greater presence in local elected offices, where supply barriers such as time devoted to political activity or geographical distance are lower, rates remain is quite similar at the local and at the national one. The presence of women in executive positions is known to be lower. The same dataset reports at the national level 17.9, at the regional one 35. The women mayors form in 2020 17,2% of the population of mayors (13,2 in 2011)[1].

Specifically, gender bias is most marked at the top – that is, the apex of executive positions. In sum, it is more difficult for women to gain access to assemblies, and it is particularly difficult for them to become part of the core power apparatus. Because there is a scarce literature focusing on the role of women in local governments but not in national legislatures, we get inspiration from the latter. Even if we acknowledge that positions in legislatures and

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[1] On this point, see also: Müller-Rommell and Vercesi (2017); the authors found that between 1945 and 2014, only 14 women of a total of 290 prime ministers (4.5 per cent) have led European parliamentary systems. In recent works focusing on the national levels for a large sample of countries, Gerring (2019) confirms the general trends observed, since they state that 81% of political elites overall are male, while 92% of elites at the apex (the top one or two decision-makers) are male. Specifically, gender bias is most marked at the top – that is, the apex of executive positions. In sum, it is more difficult for women to gain access to assemblies, and it is particularly difficult for them to become part of the core power apparatus

in executives differ, they both are elected officials. Therefore, we assume that the main elements of the theories of political representation apply to the two groups.

Certainly, the mainstream approach to political representation of women is grounded upon the basic assumption that "descriptive representation usually furthers the substantive representation of interests by improving the quality of deliberation" (Mandsbridge, 1999: 654), even if nuances are stablished by part of the academia. The debate on the critical mass theory, which builds on the premise that "all women will act for women as soon as their numbers increase", is challenged by the critical actors' approach "critical actors are those who act individually or collectively to bring about women-friendly policy change" (Childs and Krook, 2009: 145 and 127). This rich debate leads to open up new paths for analysing women's representation

Even if recent experimental evidence points towards a more positive evaluation of political systems when women's representation is higher (since greater women's presence gives all citizens clues about how the political system works (Verge, et al, 2020)), these findings have to be supported with more research. In general terms, the majoritarian approach in gender studies sticks to this evidence, as we also do, but this complex debate between numbers and substance on representation merits further investigation and more nuanced statements.

## 2.1 Who and how are they? Descriptive representation

The relative recent arrival of women in politics has not occurred without resistance, what has been translated into a specific gendered distinctive pattern. As a result, the groups of women and men in politics differ in several aspects: analyses of women within the political elite have consistently identified that, compared to men, women are likely to be a) less in number, b) better educated (Rule, 1987; Matland, 1998, Steyvers and Medir, 2018) and c) recruited in greater numbers in left-leaning parties (Caul, 1999). Some studies conducted on legislatures at regional and provincial levels also report that they tend to be younger compared to their male counterparts (Bäck 2006, Navarro and Medir, 2015).

Regarding the share of women in political institutions, the literature has linked their higher or lower presence to three categories of factors: *institutional* (Kittilson, 2006; Oñate, 2014; Wängnerud, 2009), such as electoral rules, how parties organise candidate selection or gender quotas; *socioeconomic* (Iversen and Rosenbluth, 2008; Rosenbluth et al., 2006), such as the proportion of women in the workforce and the strength of the welfare state; and

*cultural or contextual* (Dahlerup and Leyennard 2013; Sundström and Stockemer, 2015), like modernisation trends, beliefs about equality and the social acceptance of women for representational and leadership roles. For our purposes, we propose to analyze institutional and contextual variables first, followed by individual and socioeconomic elements.

Concerning institutional and contextual variables, Sundström and Stockemer (2015) state that women's representation levels at the local level are not independent of their national context, and at the same time other authors state that the context in which female leadership is undertaken is important, so that one cannot simply extrapolate from studies finding strong gender effects in very different institutional settings (Ferreira and Gyourko 2014).

If at the central level of government more women are found in arenas with proportional representation (PR) electoral systems and greater district magnitudes, where there are more posts in the ballot to distribute, at the local level, this can be seen in systems of directly (or strong) elected mayors, where candidates compete for a single post (FPTP, plurality systems), with the effect of reducing the number of women in such mayoral offices. The effect has been observed in Steyvers and Reynaert, 2006, and can be checked for the more recent years. More generally, larger shares of women councilors and mayors are found in Scandinavian, where beliefs about equality are more deeply rooted in the culture. Moreover, the literature has widely proved that women are primarily recruited from left-wing parties, irrespective the electoral system. Moreover, even in those cases where electoral systems belong to the same "family" they may not automatically bring about the same effect in every country. This is largely due to its differentiation on their particular features and types, and because the electoral system is only one of several factors that have an impact on women's representation (depending largely on the respective political and social conditions of each country). Even though, a broader distinction between PR systems and majority systems may apply, since proportional systems are generally more open to inclusion than majority systems.

Ideology or party family constitutes a dimension of distinctiveness for women in political institutions. The dominant literature illustrates that women are primarily recruited from left-wing parties. These parties would be more likely to encourage the representation of women in parliaments and governments (Reynolds, 1999) owing to the centrality of egalitarian values in their agendas, as well as their application of internal quota policies. Other authors precise that left-wing parties are more prone to grant women their first access to elected

positions while right-wing parties score higher in maintaining them in parliaments showing more effectiveness in promoting their careers (Santana & Aguilar, 2019), maybe because they are more interested in having professional female MPs. Also applying for local governments, left-wing parties seem to contribute the largest share of women in parliaments and assemblies at all echelons, while minor parties in particular, but also conservative and right-wing parties, often tend to eschew the topic of female candidacies (Fortin-Rittberger et al. 2017). Specially in the ideological variable, the dominant literature in this field is based on the available evidence, which turns to be somehow ideologically self-selected, and thus subject to limitations.

A relevant variable in local government analysis, the size of the political unit, has not been particularly scrutinized and no clear relationship emerges from the literature. Big cities tend to concentrate more political power than small ones, thus probably being more object of strong political actors' ambitions (less consequently of women), and the women candidates find there less space and more obstacles. Kjaer.et al, (2018) points towards the contrary hypothesis, but their work relates to councilors and not mayors. The specificity of the mayoral position, suggest the possible efficacy of the power approaches that state that women tend to reach more easily the less powerful positions (this is to say, small municipalities).

In relation with individual aspects, particularly the level of education attained, the literature on political elites describes a pattern of political leaders having high levels of education and being likely to belong to specific qualified professions (Cotta and Best 2000). University training is today commonplace among political elites. This is the case partly because governing has become an increasingly complex activity that requires a good level of mastery of intricate issues, as well as due to the fact that the proportion of people with higher educational credentials has dramatically increased in recent decades. However, studies have identified differences between male and female politicians, with women tending to be better educated (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2008). This indicates that education continues to be a vital resource for women (Paxton and Hughes, 2013) in overcoming the structural disadvantages they face in making it to the electoral list.

Finally, age is also an interesting trait to explore. Müller-Rommel and Vercesi (2017) demonstrate in their work on European prime ministers that, for executive offices, women would need to gather substantial life and political experience before reaching top political

positions, due to their reported initial disadvantage in the competition for candidacy. However, when we look at the scarce literature focusing on mayors' age it seems to point towards women mayor being younger than their male counterparts (Ryan, Pini, and Brown 2005).

Summing up, the theoretical framework mobilized tends to configure a local arena where women urban mayors are expected to be older (as in other executive positions), better educated and with greater leftist party affiliation than men. Moreover, the strong personalization of politics and city size should disadvantage the presence of women.

2.2- Are they different in interests and perspectives? Substantive representation

Once they are in representative positions, what difference, if any, do women make? An overview to the specialized literature presents evidence that having more women in positions of power has an effect.

The idea of women having a distinctive type of political and policy action or leadership style resides for some observers on the idea that they share similar life experiences (such as childbearing, occupation and unequal positions in paid and unpaid work) and so share interests as well (Phillips, 1995). In contrast, some authors claim that not all women have shared life trajectories and conclude that the political representation of women may not have special effect in representing women's interests or emphasizing themes related to the struggle against discriminations and in favor of equality and autonomy (Celis 2008). Regardless of the perspective, the question debated is whether or not some issues can be identified as privileged in women leader's policy agendas. A substantial corpus of empirical research at the central levels of government show that women offer distinctive attitudes and values and contribute to improving women's positions in society through their work in parliaments and executive offices (Mateo-Diaz 2005; Thomas and Wilcox 2005). Some empirical research on the local sphere converges with such observations.

For instance, in their examination of the allocation of local expenditure by mayors in Brazilian municipalities, Funk and Philips (2018) find that greater female representation as mayors and city councilors renders it more likely that spending will be focused on issues that disproportionately concern women, hence electing women improves women's substantive representation. Such subjects include family and children's issues, health care, social services and the environment (Little, Dunn, and Deen 2001; Poggione 2004). In a similar vein, Holman (2014) finds that the presence of a female mayor has a positive

influence on the likelihood a city participates in funding social welfare programs, together with the amount of monetary resources devoted to those issues. Some empirical studies in local government in the Nordic countries also report a more marked interest among women in social policy agendas as well as outcomes that are beneficial for women in their daily lives (Bratton and Ray 2002; Wängnerud and Sundell 2012). In Norway and Sweden it is shown that municipalities that elect a large number of women tend to be gender-equal in other respects, including policy outputs such as childcare coverage (Bratton and Ray 2002), employment opportunities for women (Wängnerud and Sundell 2012) and public expenditure in areas related to the situation of female citizens (Svaleryd 2009).

Summing up, the presence of women may be associated to legitimacy issues, such as perceptions of a more open and fairer political system and, specially, of more diverse representatives' profiles and legislative agendas (Verge, et al, 2020). Therefore, urban women mayors should assign greater importance to social-related issues in the policy agenda than men do.


## 3. Methods, data and expectations

Our data are derived from an original and unique database gathered in 29 countries, through the distribution of a questionnaire addressed to the mayors (or their equivalent) of cities with more than 10,000 inhabitants. The sample represents 30.7 per cent of the total population investigated by the survey. Although the data set is not strictly a sample, we believe that the number of mayors interviewed, as well as its territorial and gender representation, provide suitable conditions for reliable statistical analysis (see Table 1). The data used in this article has been created by a long-lasting academic collaboration of local government scholars that have implemented two waves of questionnaires at Mayors for comparative purposes (Heinelt & Magnier, 2018). Concerning the content of the questionnaire, it has been specially designed to overcome national particularities and to ask for concepts that are directly comparable across countries and widely accepted in the academia. In the event that there is an effect of social desirability in the answers (sincerity in mayors' responses), it would be present in all the respondents. Therefore, the observed differences hold and neutralize this potential effect. Therefore, no relevant biases in the content, structure and wording of the questionnaire are expected. The major caveat comes from the selection of municipalities being limited to those of medium and large size. Therefore, even the municipality size

discriminant can be only partially examined: the findings of this contribution apply to the elites of >10.000 inhabitants local governments.

**Table 1.** Percentage of women mayors in Europe and in our sample (n women=348)

| | Response rate (%) | women at mayoralty* (%) | Women in sample % | Women in sample N | Local government system** | Direct election*** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sweden | 74.5 | 36.9 | 34.1 | 45 | Committee-leader | |
| Iceland | 83.3 | 21.6 | 20 | 1 | Committee-leader | X |
| Latvia | 16.3 | 24.4 | 33 | 2 | Committee-leader | |
| Slovakia | 24.7 | 23.3 | 5.9 | 1 | Strong mayor | X |
| Norway | 41.2 | 28 | 19 | 4 | Council manager | |
| Netherlands | 34.2 | 21.6 | 22.4 | 26 | Collective | |
| Hungary | 43.0 | 20.5 | 11.3 | 8 | Strong mayor | X |
| Ireland | 35.5 | 19.4 (2015) | 0 | 0 | Council manager | |
| Spain | 40.3 | 17.4 | 21.5 | 65 | Strong mayor | X |
| England | 10.8 | 17.4 (in UK) | 7.4 | 2 | Strong mayor/Committee-leader/ Collective | both |
| France | 7.2 | 16 | 13.8 | 8 | Strong mayor | X |
| Belgium | 44.6 | 14.8 | 17 | 19 | Collective | |
| Italy | 20.5 | 14.1 | 14.9 | 26 | Strong mayor | X |
| Denmark | 51.1 | 11.2 | 16.7 | 8 | Committee-leader | |
| Poland | 24.9 | 10.7 | 14.8 | 26 | Strong mayor | X |
| Germany | 38.5 | 8.9 | 10.2 | 58 | Strong mayor/Collective | X |
| Lithuania | 54.4 | 8.3 | 10 | 3 | Council manager | |
| Portugal | 43.0 | 7.5 | 10 | 7 | Strong mayor | X |
| Austria | 34.9 | 7.5 | 11.8 | 4 | Strong mayor | both |
| Slovenia | 45.3 | 7.5 | 4.2 | 1 | Strong mayor | X |
| Croatia | 45.9 | 7 | 10.7 | 8 | Strong mayor | X |
| Serbia | 37.6 | 6.6 | 4 | 2 | Committee-leader | |
| Greece | 40.7 | 4.9 | 4.1 | 4 | Strong mayor | X |
| Romania | 3.9 | 4.5 | 12.5 | 1 | Strong mayor | X |
| Czech Republic | 33.9 | 4.2 | 14.8 | 9 | Collective | |
| Cyprus | 38.9 | 3.8 | - | | Strong mayor | X |
| Switzerland | 67.6 | - | 10 | 10 | Collective | X |
| Albania | 50.8 | - | 17.9 | 5 | Strong mayor | X |
| Israel | 10.8 | - | - | | Strong mayor | X |
| Total | | 14.9 | 12.9 | 348 | | |

*European Institute for Gender Equality (2017)*

**typology of Mouritzen and Svara (2002)*

***mayors are designated either by direct election or as official leader (first candidate of a party list) of a majority formed by election*

*Source: European Institute for Gender Equality (2017) and The European Mayor II survey*

Our sample consists of 348 women out of 2,396 mayors (12.9 per cent), fairly evenly distributed across our 29 countries without remarkable deviant cases (as displayed in Table 1) while ensuring that those countries that include greater numbers of cases are not biased. The comparison between the available data of women mayors per country in 2017 confirms that the potential bias of our sample of women (if exist) are limited to some national cases and blur when the whole sample is considered, which is the case of all our analysis, since we do not perform any cross-country research. Most of the data (about 90 per cent) were collected in 2015 and in the first quarter of 2016. The original version of the survey was

drafted in English, then it was translated by the different national experts thus slightly adapting the questionnaire to the idiosyncratic institutional settings of the different countries. Except Germany who sent the questionnaire in paper format, the research groups followed the development of its own data collection trough a common online questionnaire sent to official's email addresses of mayors. Besides, most teams adopted telephone campaigns in order to invite the mayors to complete the questionnaire. The average response rate per country is 37.8 per cent, ranging from the 3.9 per cent in Romania to 83.3 per cent in Iceland (see figure 1 and table 1).

**Figure 1**
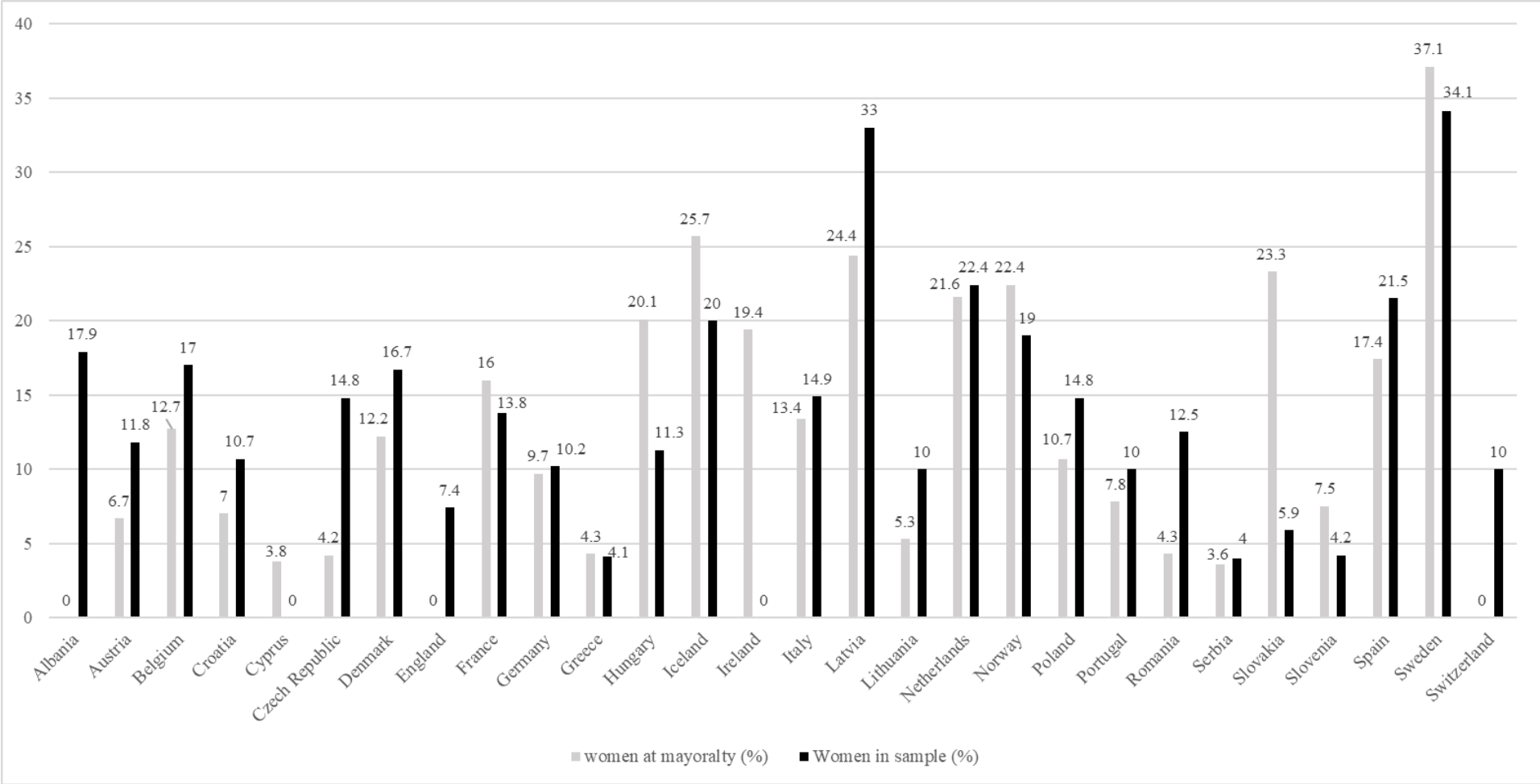


Source: European Institute for Gender Equality (2015) and Polleader

Exploiting intensively our dataset and in order to propose a more complete picture of the urban European woman mayor, we worked starting from the most classical questioning of the literature, a set of two blocks of hypotheses targeting descriptive and substantive representation.

H1 Concerning descriptive representation:

H1a) The urban women mayors are supposed to be older, better educated and with greater leftist party affiliation than men.

H1b) The strong personalization of politics (favoured by strong mayor forms) should promote more the presence of men

H1c) City size is expected to strengthen the trend in favor of male.

H2. Related to the substantive representation of mayoralty

H2: Urban women mayors should assign greater importance to social issues in the policy agenda than men do.

Even though the questionnaire was not designed to test gender differences, as a means of exploring specific dimensions of gender issues in council leaders it is viable and worthwhile. Indeed, we could map the social background and political affiliation of women and men, and we enjoy the potential to profile (if relevant) a different approach to policy priorities based on gender.

For developing our analysis, we will use a set of questions from our survey that can be classified into two main groups: socio-political background on the one hand, and policy priorities on the other. For the former we use classical variables such as age, education level, party membership (Yes/no) and party family (progressive/conservative). For the latter we focus on questions regarding the prioritisation and importance of certain challenges on mayors' policy agendas.

Gender is our main independent variable, being reported by respondents and thereby enabling us to distinguish between two independent groups based on the natural attribute of sex. In this sense, the analysis made in this paper states that 'gender' is an independent attribute of our objects of analysis (mayors) that has an impact on their role, perceptions and visions. Our analyses focus on differences between groups (men versus women), not on cross-country comparisons. The general null hypothesis operates under the theoretical

assumption that these groups are two different samples from the same population, thus assuming that there are no differences between men and women mayors in their social backgrounds, recruitment and perceptions of policy priorities. Therefore, the tests made in this paper reflect the likelihood that their values are equal.

First, we provide empirical bivariate evidence of such differences and commonalities. To offer more than mere descriptive results, we stick to bivariate analysis based on independent t-test and chi-square tests for the main socio-political aspects of our first group of hypotheses. To test the basic assumption that no differences based on gender for an identical population exist, we primarily use the independent means t-test for continuous variables and Pearson's chi-square test for categorical variables. The independent samples t-test compares the means of two sets of values from one continuous variable, while the Pearson's chi-square tests the idea of comparing the frequencies observed in certain categories to the frequencies one might expect to find in those categories by chance. When using the latter technique, we often recode original variables in the database into a dichotomous version to create 2×2 matrices that easily capture the most important information for each indicator.

Nevertheless, to test our second hypothesis (substantive representation), we rely on more complex models, a set of regression models aimed at identifying the intertwined effects of personal traits and institutional settings in different European countries. First, we fit as a discriminatory analysis a one-way ANOVA test for the nine policy priorities included in the questionnaire. After running the ANOVA test, we run several multilevel regression models, all of which with gender as the main independent variable of interest for every policy priority. We use linear regression models to test our dependent variable on the importance given by people in mayoralty to several policy priorities. In order to control the fixed-country effects and the potential divergences caused by the distribution of the sample, we fit OLS multilevel models with varying intercept by country. Departing from the original SPSS matrix database, we used R to perform all these analyses.

## 4. Empirical results

### 4.1 Bivariate evidence of a persistent gender gap in descriptive representation

Our data evidence significant differences in the mayors' personal traits both in terms of age and education, thereby confirming only one of our expectations: on average, elected women

are younger and better educated than their male colleagues. women in our sample are more present in the early age classes, in particular under 50 years since a 44.7% of the women in the sample have less than 50 (while 36,6% of men have less than 50 years). Our data seem to configure a different structure of age distribution within urban mayors divided by gender.

Moreover, the age difference between the two groups is statistically significant and is about 1.8 years, with Levene's test being significant (0.048), equal variance not assumed and the mean difference due to gender statistically significant (p-value is 0.001), see Table 2.

**Table 2.** T-test and Chi-square test for age and education

| Age | | Higher Education | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Women's age (mean) | 50.52 | Women's with higher education (%) | 84.4 |
| Men's age (mean) | 52.32 | Men's with higher education (%) | 77.8 |
| Levene's test (p-value) | 0.048 | $\chi^2$ | 7.472 |
| t-test | -3.520 | p-value | 0.006 |
| Difference in means | -1.799 | Fisher's exact test | 0.006 |
| p-value | 0.000 | Odds ratio | 0.647 |
| $R^2$ | 0.02 | | |

Source: The European Mayor II survey

These results are contrary to our expectations and may appear to be counter-intuitive. Indeed, we could expect women mayors to be older than their male counterparts, as has been shown in other executive positions (Müller-Rommel and Vercesi, 2017 in particular as already reminded). This supposition was due to the fact that they may have been prevented from entering politics during their child-rearing period, given the fact that women are traditionally more likely to take more responsibility for duties related to family care. In addition, women are expected to require a longer trajectory and greater experience in politics before entering top executive positions. Indeed, if we review political career duration at the time of the survey[2], men appear to have longer careers than women do. In this sense, men enter in politics, on average 2.5 years before women, representing a gap slightly larger than the age difference. Some finding in the scarce literature on local politics and gender already

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[2] Calculated considering the years from the first party membership to 2016, as reported by interviewees in the questionnaire.

accounteds for these differences in age in previous studies of European mayors (Steyvers and Reynaerts, 2006).

The convergence between these results and those obtained on the career length is nevertheless particularly interesting, and not underlined in the literature. Women are not only younger; they access more rapidly to the apex position in local government. Perhaps because they are also more often well qualified: 77.8 per cent of the men had attained a university degree, compared to 84.4 percent of the women.

Institutions appear nevertheless to be key factors in understanding the presence of women in urban mayoralties. Which external conditions favour the election of women more than others? Our data indicate a significant relationship between gender and two different contextual factors: city size and electoral system. Moreover, we will ascertain whether the party membership and the ideological orientation of mayors, therefore the orientation of the party or coalition they were supported by, yields differences by gender.

We find differences in the distribution of men and women regarding city size, since women are ruling in significantly smaller cities than men do (32.937 inhabitants in average for women and 40.717 in average for men, t-test being significant at 0.09). Moreover, considering a threshold of 30,000 inhabitants in order to divide the cities into two categories, smaller and larger, women have a statistically significant greater presence in the first category: 15.3 per cent compared to 11.9 per cent elected in "big" cities, as can be seen in Table 3A. In addition, according to table 3B, women are more numerous in cities where the electoral system is centered on the indirect election of the mayor: in such institutional contexts, the proportion of women mayors is 20.4 per cent, whereas in direct election systems the figure is only 12.6 per cent. Compared to men, women have 1.76 times more odds to be elected in indirect or weak electoral systems (Table 3B).

**Table 3A)** Mayors by city dimension (Chi-square test and t-test)

| *City size* | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Chi-square test (30.000 inhab threshold)* | | *Direct t-test of means* | |
| Female mayor in small cities (%) | 15.3 | Female Mayor (inhabitants) | 32937.4 |
| Female mayor in big cities (%) | 11.9 | Men Mayor (inhabitants) | 40717.6 |
| $\chi^2$ | 4.791 | Levene's test (p-value) | 0.027 |
| p-value | 0.029 | t-test | -2,65 |
| Fisher's exact test | 0.030 | Difference in means | 7780.22 |
| Odds ratio | 1.337 | p-value | 0.000 |

**Table 3B)** Mayors by electoral system (Chi-square test and t-test)

| *Electoral system* | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Chi-square within indirect electoral system* | | *Chi-square women vs men* | |
| Female mayor in indirect election system (%) | 20.4 | Female mayor in indirect election system (%) | 35,1 |
| Female mayor in direct election system (%) | 12.6 | Male mayor in indirect election system (%) | 23.2 |
| $\chi^2$ | 22.38 | $\chi^2$ | 22,38 |
| p-value | 0.000 | p-value | 0.000 |
| Fisher's exact test | 0.000 | Fisher's exact test | 0.000 |
| Odds ratio | 1.788 | Odds ratio | 1.76 |

Indeed, the party system remains at the center of the local political scene even if its importance is relatively diminished in comparison with the past. Parties continue to play a key role as gatekeepers, managing the selection process of politicians. Our data show a comparatively larger presence of partisan women. Party membership is greater between urban female mayors than between men (80.3 per cent vs. 77 per cent) and only 14.4 per cent of women claim to have never joined a political party, compared to men at 15.2 per cent (Table 3C).

An additional important finding in the field is that women do better in left-wing parties (as remarked in Dahlerup and Leyenaard 2013; Wängnerud 2009). Although party ideology today is supposed to matter less than in the past, leftist parties have traditionally been more likely to nominate women to safe places on their lists. Our survey data highlight significant differences regarding the political orientation of males and females, confirming this trend reported in the literature. We used two variables in the questionnaire to evaluate the political orientation of the respondents according to the left-right axis. The first question is built as a scale, asking mayors to place themselves in a range from 0 (left) to 10 (right). The second question directly investigated the partisan affiliation of the respondents; the later recodification according to Andersson et al.'s work (2014) enabled us to differentiate between left- and right-wing parties. Females were more likely to identify themselves on the left than were men. Moreover, this was not only true in the case of the self-placement of the interviewees, but also when considering party membership and consequent placement into larger political families. Certainly, women are 1.61 times more likely to be enrolled in left-wing parties and significantly more ideologically oriented to the left than are men (Table 3C).

**Table 3C)** Women in left-wing parties and ideological self-placement (Chi-square test and t-test)

| Left-Wing parties | | Ideological self-placement | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Female member of left-wing parties (%) | 55.5 | Female self-placement (0-10 mean) | 4,55 |
| Male member of left-wing parties (%) | 43.5 | Male self-placement (0-10 mean) | 5,02 |
| $\chi^2$ | 10.769 | Levene's test (p-value) | 0.031 |
| p-value | 0.001 | t-test | -3.317 |
| Fisher's exact test | 0.001 | Difference in means | -0,469 |
| Odds ratio | 1.615 | p-value | 0.001 |

*Source: The European Mayor II survey*

Our bivariate data analyses enable us to develop a profile in which contextual and institutional variables play an important role in gender dynamics, to an even greater extent than the role played by the personal characteristics of candidates. We are more likely to find a woman mayor if we look at a small town, with a system involving an indirect election and with members of left-oriented parties. The comparatively limited presence of women as leaders of bigger cities, where they continue to encounter greater difficulties in reaching office, emphasizes the persistence of social barriers and prejudices that preclude women from attaining mayoral leadership. In this sense, our findings are in line with most of the existing literature on the descriptive representation of mayors.

If we turn our attention to more substantive representation issues, we uphold the assumption that women have certain interests in common, as claimed by studies on women in representative bodies. Therefore, we expect that women will tend to manifest distinctive values and attitudes as a group and to share common interests and policy priorities at the mayoral office as well, especially focusing on social-oriented policies. In fact, moving to the agenda's priorities of mayors (figure 3), we observe that women give comparatively more importance to policies oriented to the maintenance or improvement of social cohesion of their community. We consider here the average response rate (scale from 1 to 5) to a set of questions (see the concrete wordings of the survey in Appendix). Nine issues were proposed to the mayors as possible key priorities in their agenda, they must answer give a rank from 1 to 5.

**Figure 2**

## Agenda's political priorities



| | Male | Female |
|---|---|---|
| A - To increase the attractiveness of the municipality | 4,61 | 4,51 |
| B - To develop social policies | 4,30 | 4,48 |
| G - To stimulate economic growth and employment | 4,37 | 4,45 |
| H - To improve communal infrastructure | 4,24 | 4,24 |
| E - To address politico-administrative issues | 3,98 | 4,09 |
| C - To protect the natural environment | 3,95 | 3,99 |
| D - To secure public safety | 3,94 | 3,93 |
| I - To improve the integration of ethnic, religious or cultural minorities | 3,60 | 3,81 |
| F - To preserve the local identity | 3,59 | 3,47 |

■ Male ■ Female

Performing several ANOVA tests (figures in annex) regarding the question about the main challenges and priorities faced by mayors, we furthermore pointed out the differences between men and women mayors: in five out of nine issues the two considered groups of respondents diverge significantly, whereas similar visions and perceptions were present in remaining four items. Women assigned comparatively lower values to the item referring to the general and wide transformation of their cities in more attractive places (Response A) and their attention to "developing a traditional lifestyle" (Response F), while they seem to be more attentive to facing the concrete problems of their local communities: reducing social differences through the implementation of social policies (Response B); raising the efficiency of the administrative machine for improving relations with citizens (Response E); and improving the internal social cohesion of the community (Response I). The overall bivariate picture offers evidence for considering the existence of a slight gender gap in terms of priorities for people-oriented challenges. The remainder of the topics (C, D, G and H) do not exhibit significant differences.

Multivariate analysis allows us to better understand the descriptive representation of our empirical findings and the dynamics through which is developing the traditionally registered difference between women and men in performing their mayoralty.

## 4.2 Modelling the gendered mayoral office: differences in priorities

Given that politics (and particularly mayors' operating space) do not occur in bivariate environments, as well as the fact that a more robust approach to these particular issues is required, we propose a multivariate analysis controlling for the main personal and institutional variables affecting local governments' orientation. Therefore, we construct four multivariate models for each social-policy priority as dependent variables: developing social policies (B), improving relations with citizens through administrative performance (E), fostering a traditional lifestyle (F), and improving internal social cohesion of the community (I).

We build our models in a three-step process, where the first model is exclusively a bivariate multilevel regression with gender as the unique independent variable, the second includes personal attributes (level of education, age and partisanship), and the third adds institutional

variables (typology of local government[3], local autonomy index *lai2014[4]* and the size of the jurisdiction, i.e., inhabitants). This process allows us to test whether gender maintains its explanatory power even when controlling for personal traits, national and institutional settings. The following Table 4 accounts for the models.

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[3] The classification is based on the classical work of Mouritzen and Svara (2002), analyzing horizontal leadership at mayoralty.

[4] The LAI index is the final product of a project aiming to measuring and comparing local autonomy in Europe. The final index takes into account 11 different variables measuring different aspects of local autonomy in 39 European countries. The data set is downloadable, together with more information, here: http://local-autonomy.andreasladner.ch/

**Table 4: Modelling social priorities at mayoralty**

| Dependent variable: | Below are a number of challenges that many municipalities are facing. For each challenge please indicate the degree to which it is an important priority on the policy agenda of you as a mayor during your current term of office | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Develop social policies | | | Improve citizens relations | | | Mantain traditional lifestyle | | | Integration of minorities | | |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Women | 0.162*** (0.044) | 0.138*** (0.046) | 0.143*** (0.047) | 0.121*** (0.046) | 0.120** (0.048) | 0.120** (0.050) | 0.048 (0.054) | 0.018 (0.057) | 0.014 (0.060) | 0.177*** (0.056) | 0.184*** (0.058) | 0.182*** (0.061) |
| Partisanship (No) | | -0.075* (0.042) | -0.070* (0.042) | | -0.069 (0.044) | -0.065 (0.044) | | 0.025 (0.052) | 0.023 (0.053) | | -0.090* (0.053) | -0.086 (0.054) |
| Secondary education | | 0.031 (0.086) | 0.022 (0.086) | | -0.131 (0.091) | -0.120 (0.092) | | 0.009 (0.106) | 0.041 (0.108) | | -0.134 (0.109) | -0.131 (0.111) |
| Higher Education | | 0.020 (0.078) | 0.013 (0.078) | | -0.105 (0.082) | -0.093 (0.083) | | -0.114 (0.097) | -0.097 (0.099) | | -0.212** (0.100) | -0.212** (0.101) |
| Age (years) | | 0.003 (0.002) | 0.003* (0.002) | | 0.005** (0.002) | 0.005** (0.002) | | 0.002 (0.002) | 0.003 (0.002) | | 0.005** (0.002) | 0.005* (0.002) |
| Local Autonomy Index 2014 (lai2014) | | | -0.034** (0.017) | | | -0.047** (0.019) | | | -0.049** (0.021) | | | -0.015 (0.020) |
| Direct election of Mayor form | | | 0.081 (0.168) | | | 0.410** (0.186) | | | 0.193 (0.203) | | | 0.406** (0.194) |
| Collective Form Mayor | | | -0.477* (0.265) | | | -0.667** (0.298) | | | -0.463 (0.319) | | | -0.433 (0.302) |
| Comittee leader form | | | -0.079 (0.290) | | | -0.330 (0.325) | | | -0.378 (0.349) | | | 0.122 (0.331) |
| Strong Mayor Form | | | -0.307 (0.282) | | | -0.623** (0.315) | | | -0.372 (0.340) | | | -0.419 (0.324) |
| Inhabitants (log) | | | 0.035 (0.022) | | | 0.010 (0.023) | | | -0.041 (0.028) | | | 0.095*** (0.028) |
| Country fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Constant | 4.523*** (0.076) | 4.346*** (0.148) | 5.028*** (0.563) | 4.197*** (0.085) | 4.080*** (0.160) | 5.305*** (0.625) | 3.629*** (0.087) | 3.623*** (0.180) | 5.400*** (0.686) | 3.763*** (0.082) | 3.736*** (0.180) | 3.140*** (0.663) |
| Observations | 2,334 | 2,151 | 1,996 | 2,327 | 2,148 | 1,994 | 2,338 | 2,154 | 2,001 | 2,337 | 2,154 | 1,999 |
| Log Likelihood | -2,625.193 | -2,430.802 | -2,200.878 | -2,743.422 | -2,534.100 | -2,329.408 | -3,127.527 | -2,891.706 | -2,679.572 | -3,177.210 | -2,934.021 | -2,714.450 |
| Akaike Inf. Crit. | 5,258.386 | 4,877.604 | 4,429.756 | 5,494.844 | 5,084.200 | 4,686.817 | 6,263.053 | 5,799.412 | 5,387.145 | 6,362.420 | 5,884.043 | 5,456.899 |
| Bayesian Inf. Crit. | 5,281.407 | 4,922.993 | 4,508.141 | 5,517.853 | 5,129.578 | 4,765.187 | 6,286.081 | 5,844.812 | 5,465.564 | 6,385.446 | 5,929.443 | 5,535.305 |

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

The general picture for the four social-oriented items (B, E, F and I) is quite clear. Although the significance of gender disappears for the question on maintaining a traditional lifestyle (F), it is maintained for the other three social-oriented items. Indeed, it is robust for each of the three proposed models and for every step model we present.

The responses to these policy priority issues are statistically significant most of them to a $p<0.01$ value and with an average slope effect of 0.148 of gender differences. Certainly, the slope size of the effect is modest (the predicted change in the declared policy priority for the shifting in gender) but allows us to infer that the fact of having a woman in the mayoralty increases the possibility to find more social-related priorities and a more progressive agenda of local governments.

The rest of independent variables included in our models do not clearly show a consistent pattern of impact on the different dependent variables. However, the LAI index appears as a moderator of social-oriented items of mayors (maybe because more autonomy implies more resources *per se* and less trade-offs between welfare policies and other policies), the direct election of mayors increases the likelihood of promoting social policies in E and I (but not in B and F) and the population of the municipality does not seem to matter (maybe because our sample includes municipalities above 10.000 inhabitants where the classic divide between big and small is somehow blurred).   In any case, these results show explicitly that women at mayoralty tend to assign higher priority than men to developing social policies (B), addressing administrative issues with the aim of improving citizens' relations (E), and fostering the integration of minorities (I). Gender is not significant in "maintaining a traditional lifestyle", but it is probably the less clearly socially-oriented item in our set of possible answers.  The overall results show that gender maintains its explanatory power, and makes a steady difference in social policy priorities, for these particular items even when controlling for country and a variety of personal, contextual and institutional variables. Indeed, gender appears to be a systematically consistent variable of any of the different models, clearly pointing towards a clear pattern of distinctiveness. These findings point to the confirmation of an identifiable and distinctive substantive representation of women mayors. In other words, the presence of women at the mayoral office has the effect of enhancing social issues in local agendas, at least in terms of policy priorities. The implications are straightforward: increasing the presence of women in the political apex of local power not only stands by itself, for reasons of equality, but may also contribute to

address more effectively the many social challenges that we face as society after having been hit by the successive recent crises.

## 5. Conclusion

This is an original work exploring gender issues based on a unique data set on mayors' perceptions on social background and political priorities across urban Europe. It has allowed us to offer new and relevant insights regarding a very particular political executive position: mayoralty. In this paper, we focus on two key vectors of research: social background (descriptive representation) and an illustration of policy priorities (substantive representation). Indeed, our main findings reinforce the notion of a gendered path in the selection process. Leaving aside the question of share of women in mayoral offices (which cannot be accurately addressed with our data as we work with a sample), as expected, women mayors' career differs from men mayors. Moreover, we offer robust findings on how policy priorities also differ between these two groups.

Concerning the main social background variables analyzed, we find results that are in line with scarce previous research, particularly studies that reflect the fact that women are younger and better qualified. Even if the specificity of the mayoral position (executive) stimulates us to hypothesize that women would arrive later and would therefore be older than men, we find that women mayors are actually younger and have shorter political careers.

Regarding political recruitment and access to mayoralty covered by the H1 hypotheses, our results converge with those attained to date. We additionally confirm that women at the apex of European local governments have a more markedly leftist ideology than men and are more likely to come from leftist parties than their male counterparts. However, for the first time we test some institutional factors and their impacts on access to mayoralty. First, we find significantly more women in less populated cities. Second, we examined different electoral systems, finding that the presence of women at the apex is greater where strong personalization of politics (direct election of mayors) is not in place.

Finally, considering the policy priorities of women and men once in the mayoral office (Hypothesis 2) we also note relevant results partially confirming what has been detected in other political arenas: women tend to assign greater importance (priority) to social issues than men; but not only to them. On the other hand, female mayors rate the challenge of increasing local economic attractiveness to a lesser extent than do male counterparts. Mayors were asked to evaluate priorities regarding a wide range of challenges faced by

municipalities today. Among the nine challenges, we can identify social, economic, law enforcement and environmental issues: women rated these four challenges significantly higher than did men, all of which were clearly identifiable through their social content.

We must keep in mind that we are analyzing political priorities through a survey that enquires into mayors' attitudes, rather than the public policies actually and effectively implemented by the mayoralty. We do not have evidence for this translation from desires (priorities) to political decisions (the actual public policies implemented), hence our analysis is based on political ideas without allowing for mechanical translations to the effective implementation of public policies. Several preliminary results appear to indicate similar leadership styles or at least an institutionalization of the role of the mayor, which may have effects in blurring the differences between men and women regarding these dimensions when they reach the top of the local executive position. In this sense, further paths may be realized in comprehending the impact of the concrete institutional executive position in the evolution from political priorities to action, alongside the effective implementation of the agenda.

Also, this results on descriptive and substantive representation open somehow room for a debate on the nature of women representation at the local level and the future of parity at the local level. Since they arrive younger and better educated to the apex and their presence seems to indicate differences in priorities (but without evidence of implementation), could these be a reflect on a more elitist representation at the local level? Probably complementary work, especially on the nature of the work women undertake in politics to secure mayoral (and also other) positions, together with an analysis of the successful and unsuccessful campaign by women for selection as mayoral candidates, would be very revealing and it would open new paths to the representation debate. Finally, concerning the increase of the needed parity, the article leaves room to investigate on how women engage in individual strategies to reach mayoralties and how political parties facilitate, or not, these careers. In less populated cities, mayoral offices may appear to be less attractive for a male political career (hence generating less competition) but may be seen (supposedly) as less difficult to combine with the many tasks yet predominantly assumed by the women. More evidence on those aspects would illuminate social movements and relevant stakeholders to push to introduce institutional and legal measures to equilibrate, from a gender perspective, all kind of mayoralties.

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Below are a number of challenges that many municipalities are facing. For each challenge please indicate the degree to which it is an important priority on the policy agenda of you as a mayor during your current term of office.

*A score of 1 indicates a "Low priority" and a score of 5 indicates a "High priority".*

*Please choose the appropriate response for each item:*

| | 1 Low priority | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 High priority |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A **To increase the attractiveness of the municipality** as a place of business and a place for people to live in, by regeneration and development projects, new cultural facilities, improvement of the aesthetics of the city, etc. | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| B **To develop social policies** to secure adequate housing, healthcare, education, public transport facilities and take care of the needs of vulnerable groups (the elderly, the young, the unemployed, etc.) | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| C **To protect the natural environment** and secure the responsible use of natural resources | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| D **To secure public safety**, fight crime and secure law and order | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| E **To address politico-administrative issues, e.g. in order to improve relations with citizens**, better and more efficient services, securing integrity and fighting corruption, etc. | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| F **To preserve the local identity** and the locality's traditional lifestyle | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| G **To stimulate economic growth and employment** | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| H **To improve communal infrastructure**, communication and transport | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| I **To improve the integration of ethnic, religious or cultural minorities** and emphasise diversity and tolerance in the local community | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

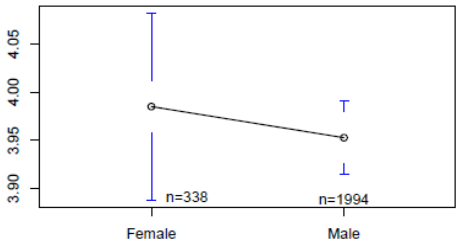**Priorities by gender (ANOVA test)**



Priorities by gender of the Mayor (ANOVA test significant in red)
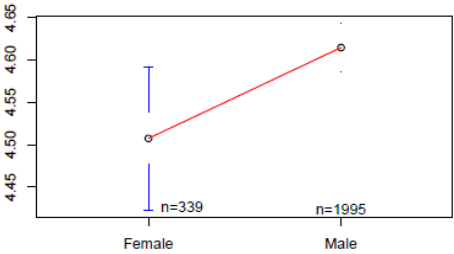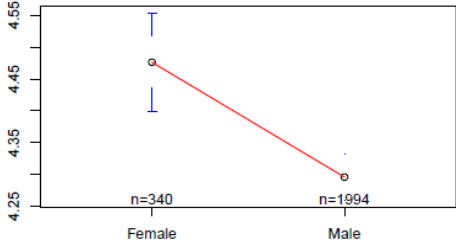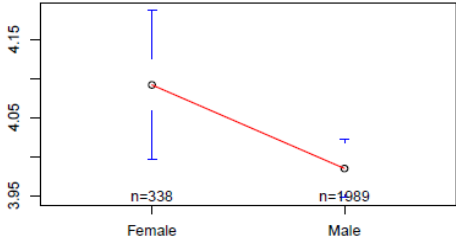
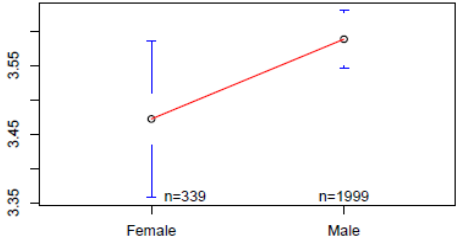A) Increase attractiveness of the City
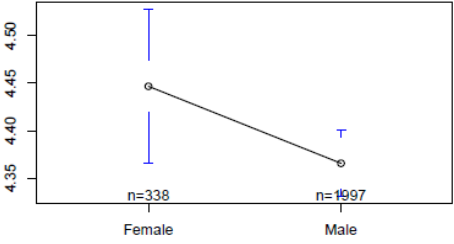B) Develop social policies
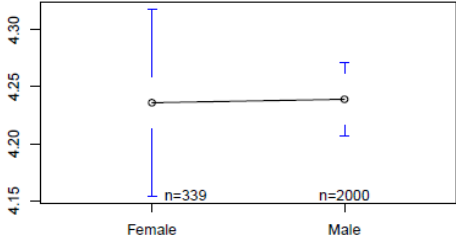C) Protect natural environement
D) Secure public safety
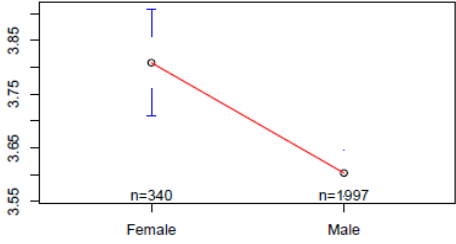E) Improve relations with citizens
F) Mantain Traditional lifestile
G) Stimulate economic growth
H) Improve communal infrastructure
I) Improve integration of minorities
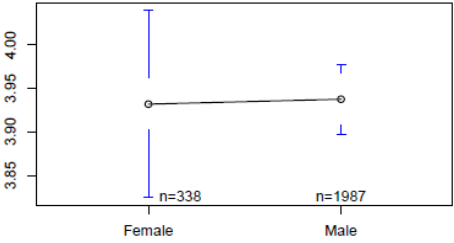
*Source: The European Mayor II survey*